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ACADEMIC HOPE: A STUDY INVESTIGATING THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
EXPERIENCE OF SELECTED AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS

by  
Jay C. Jones

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
May 8, 2008

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Burton R. Sisco

Date Approved May 8, 2008

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## ABSTRACT

Jay C. Jones

### ACADEMIC HOPE: A STUDY INVESTIGATING THE GRADUATE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE OF SELECTED AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS

2007/08

Dr. Burton R. Sisco

Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experience of selected African American male graduate students at Rowan University. Specifically, the study examined how selected students experience graduate school academically and socially. The study involved eight participants who engaged in an interview process and completed a demographic survey.

The data collection instruments included an interview schedule and a demographic survey. The demographic survey consisted of 11 questions that obtained information to better understand the participants. The interview schedule solicited information from the African American male participants about their experiences in graduate school, and what further recommendations they have to facilitate more African American males to pursue higher education.

Majority of the participants felt as though their experience was a good one but noticed a lack of African American male students in the graduate programs at Rowan. Results showed that participants felt as though the bachelor's degree was not enough in today's standards and that a master's degree was essential in the educational process. Mentoring and family support was shown to play a significant role in the educational success of the participants.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to give an honor to GOD, my Lord and personal savior Jesus Christ because without him none of this would be possible. Secondly I would like to dedicate this work to my family who supported and believed in me throughout this process. A special thanks goes to my mother Judy Jones for always being there and knowing what to say when times got rough.

This process has certainly been an experience for me. It has enhanced my knowledge of what it is to be a graduate student. Dr. Sisco my advisor, has been an inspiration to me and my work and if not for his patience and encouragement I might have not made it this far. He helped to bring out the very best of my abilities, and made it possible for me to excel in this program. To Penny McPherson-Barnes, for taking a chance with an intern during her first year as the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) director, showing me and letting me gain the experience of working in an administration office. Working with Mrs. Barnes allowed me to grow as an individual and take on responsibilities that I thought I could never do.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Researchers report that minority students tend to have a harder time than non-minority students in gaining acceptance to college and persisting to graduation. This is particularly true of African American males. Society, institutions of higher education, and social sciences have often recorded the need for the attainment of African American males to serve as role-models for future generations of African American youth in education and in society overall (Fleming, 2005). There is a growing concern about the persistence and retention of African American males in postsecondary education. More recently, universities have placed emphasis on recruiting students of color. Even though these efforts have provided some positive outcomes, there are still significant concerns about the persistence patterns of African American male students in higher education. Because African American males are more likely to be killed in a violent act, drop out of schools or to be incarcerated, they are less likely to enroll in college. The African American male has been described as an “endangered species” and the successful African American male is now being viewed as something of an anomaly (Wilson, 2000).

#### Statement of the Problem

Research has been conducted on the experiences of African American males in schooling. There are limited data on African American males in higher education, specifically those attending graduate school. Many factors contribute to the declining numbers of African American male students pursuing postsecondary education. Two of



the most basic factors that prevent African American men from ever reaching higher education are poor academic skills and limited role models (Cuyjet, 1997). According to Cuyjet (1997):

Among those African American men who do make it to college, a significant portion of the group are burdened with what can be generally characterized as an “underpreparedness” for the academic challenges of postsecondary education. This stems from a number of conditions: attending academically poorer elementary and secondary schools, lowered expectations of peers and significant adults toward academic achievement, peer pressure to disdain educational accomplishments and education as an outcome, financial hardships limiting educational access, lack of appropriate role models, and other barriers owing to racism. (p.6)

This is an on going problem that affects young Black men across the nation who tend to develop lower ambitions of achieving a higher level of education such as college, or even completing a high school education. This creates a growing concern about the persistence and retention of African American males in postsecondary education.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the graduate school experience of selected African American males enrolled at Rowan University. In particular, the study sought to understand how the selected students experience graduate school both academically and socially. Of related interest was to determine what issues are most important to African American male students. This study investigated family background

and history, educational history socioeconomic status (SES), peer relations, and racial and cultural issues.

### Significance of the Study

This study examined the obstacles that African American males go through in pursuing graduate level success. African American males are underrepresented in graduate schools across the nation. Over half of all African American students who enter colleges/universities do not complete a degree. The decreasing number of African American students enrolling and participating in higher education has been a major issue within the Black community. Thus, a study is needed to examine what current African American male graduate students are doing academically and socially, in addition to what decisions they made along the way. In this day and age, in order to overcome certain social barriers it is imperative to obtain an education, and it can be very helpful to look at African American males who are achieving that (Richards, 2007).

### Assumptions and Limitations

One assumption about African American male graduate students is that they have a fair amount of representation in graduate schools. Understanding the factors that motivate African American male students to pursue graduate education, including an analysis of the necessary steps to increase the number of African American males in graduate education, is timely given the increasing gender gap among males and females. “Among the more than fourteen million students enrolled in American colleges and universities in 1994, black men have the lowest male-to female proportion when compared to all other ethnic groups” (Cuyjet, 1997, p. 5), and this still holds true today.

Limitations in this study include finding enough subjects willing to participate since the number of African American males who pursue graduate studies are low. In addition, there is the potential for researcher bias that could influence the findings since the investigator is an African American male graduate student.

#### Operational Definitions

1. African American: Persons of citizens or residents of the United States who have origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).
2. Black: Another term associated with African American.
3. Graduate Student: Refers to an individual who has completed a bachelor's degree and is pursuing further higher education at Rowan University, with the goal of earning a master's degree, or doctorate degree.
4. Minority: Ethnic, or racial group having a distinctive presence within a society. A group having little power or representation in relation to other groups within a society ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).
5. Motivation: Intensity and persistence of behavior, the desire and willingness to do something, a feeling of interest or enthusiasm that makes somebody want to do something, or something that causes such a feeling (Encarta Dictionary, 2007).
6. Persistence: The quality of continuing steadily despite problems or obstacles (Encarta Dictionary, 2007).

#### Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do selected African American males describe their experience in graduate school at Rowan University?

2. What are the motivating factors that influenced selected African American males to pursue graduate school?
3. What issues are associated with African American males who attend graduate school?
4. What recommendations would selected African American males make to encourage more African American males to pursue higher education?

### Overview of the Report

Chapter two provides a review of scholarly research pertinent to the study. Included is a description of the African American male in graduate school, the challenges facing African American males, racial climate, programs that help to better African American males, how geographical location impacts the African American male, community, curriculum, dropout rates, family motivation, and the gender gap: men vs. women.

Chapter three describes the methodology and procedures used in the study. Included is the background of the study, the population and sample selection, the data collection instruments, and how the data were analyzed.

Chapter four presents the results of the study and addresses the research questions posed in the introduction of this chapter.

Chapter five summarizes the results of the study, offering conclusions and recommendations for further practice and research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### African American Males in Graduate School

Statistics show that about half of all students enrolled in graduate schools nationally, never earn degrees. Consequently, the experiences of black male graduate students, perhaps are the most at-risk population, and are greatly needed (Fleming, 2005). These students are subjected to poverty and poor schooling at a young age. With that in mind they have little ambitions of ever going to college let alone pursuing graduate school. These males have few examples of success that they can identify with and they generally experience more aggressive discrimination and stereotyping in education and in general society. Most importantly, a key element that prevents African American male students from achievement is the lack of educated African American role models (Fleming, 2005).

Information on African American males in higher education is very limited. There is relatively little research on this specific group. “Moreover, much of the research tends to group African Americans [male] students together with all other minorities” (Fleming, 2005, p.10). There are many reports related to African American males in business, elementary education, secondary education, incarceration, but few studies that assess higher education. Research on African American men in higher education seems to receive little attention unlike other topics pertaining to the African American men (Cuyjet, 2006). Despite the limited knowledge, it is fair to say that African American

males are underrepresented in higher education, including graduate school. There is a lack of educational achievement of African American males at the college level. The number of African American men in postsecondary educational institutions remains low. If the number of African American men in college were higher and if African American men were accounted for by the number in the U.S. population, then there would be many more black scholars in the world today (Cuyjet, 2006).

While African American male students are underrepresented in graduate schools across the nation, there are encouraging data based upon recent enrollment patterns. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2003) states that:

Since 1980 black enrollment in graduate school in the United States have more than doubled. Over the past five years the number of blacks entering graduate programs has continued to climb at a time when white enrollments have declined. (p.10)

Across the nation there are more than 158,000 African American students in graduate programs (“African Americans,” 2003). During the past two decades, there has been an increasing flow of black enrollment in graduate schools. This is a result of black students continuing to catch up with there white peers (“African Americans,” 2003). African American students as a whole are catching up to there white peers because of the increasing number of African American females enrolling in colleges and universities, while the number of African American men are at a stand still (See Gender Gap Section).

While there has been much progress made with more African American males enrolling in higher education the statistics are starting to plateau. For example, over the past 20 years there has been an increase in participation, particularly by African

American [male] students. But the dominant years have also been marked by backward steps that have worsened some of the barriers to participation (Atwell, 2004). Even with this success, there are many areas still needing improvement that have not been explored. For example, areas such as degree completion and participation in doctoral education programs are limited (Atwell, 2004). Research also states that African American male students have more access to colleges of their choice, but there is a high likelihood that they will not complete basic course work, let alone graduate (LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997). Other findings suggest that more attention is being paid to testing on all levels of education. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has turned out to be a little more than a slogan, a campaign slogan that some would characterize as an “unfunded or underfunded mandate.” In other words, NCLB has identified inadequate performance at the K-12 levels without developing measures to correct the problems (Atwell, 2004).

By not correcting the problems within the lower levels of education, higher education will be affected and the performance of African American students, once they attain this level, will likely lag. According to Atwell (2004):

In higher education, the testing mania takes the form of concentrating more on the inputs—in this case, test scores of entering students—rather than the value added or the outputs. It is clearly the case that higher education completion on the basis of the test scores of entering students works against low-income and minority students. To determine human potential requires more than testing. (p.7)

#### Challenges Facing African American Males

Throughout the nation, black enrollments in higher education have reached an all-time high. But a more important statistical measure of the performance of blacks in

higher education is that of how many black students are completing school and earning a college degree.

Many colleges and universities across the nation truly believe that diversity is an important part of an education, and actively recruit minority students to their institution. Very often these minority students have lower grade point averages or SAT scores than their non-minority counterparts. Most colleges tend to look at students whom they think will offer promise to the university. These institutions are not so much concerned with admitting well-rounded students as they are with developing well-rounded classes. Admissions officers are looking for students with many different backgrounds and talents (LaVeist, T., LaVeist, W., & Joyner, 2003). According to LaVeist et al. (2003):

Out of the 16.5 million undergrads in 1999-2000, more than a third were earning grades of C or lower. And of all African American students, 48.9 percent fell into this category—a larger percentage than in any other group. Opponents of affirmative action sometimes use statistics like these to make the case that certain ethnic groups are “in over their heads” when it comes to college. (p. 240)

LaVeist et al. (2003) also explain that:

The executive director of the National Association of Scholars, Bradford P. Wilson, explains it this way: The most obvious thing that it suggests is that African Americans are coming to colleges and universities with less preparation for college-level work than other groups. But I wouldn't blame it on affirmative action, because most of the institutions are not selective institutions. Poor grades can be a reflection of any number of cultural, personal, or academic factors. (p. 241)



There are many factors, that impact enrollment of African American male students. The two most significant factors are being under-prepared and cultural discouragement. Many young African American males are given less-than-adequate academic preparation due to poor school environments and discriminatory practices such as being tracked into behavior disorder classes in disproportionately high numbers. Compounding this broad lack of attention to academic success, many African-American young men fail to consider academic achievement a worthwhile goal and, in fact, often consider college education (and even high school graduation) as not worth the effort or not “cool” among peers (Cuyet, 2006). Studies have shown that a majority of college-age African American males have been or are incarcerated. Statistics show that there are roughly 700,000 black men enrolled in higher education institutions and 815,000 in prison. These findings suggest that an African American male is more likely to go to prison than to pursue higher education (Fleming, 2005).

#### Racial Climate

The racial climate at some colleges and universities is more positive toward African Americans than at other institutions. A caring environment, which consists of support systems, mentors, and just an over all comfortable setting, where black students can relate to faculty and staff of color. This is almost certain to have a positive impact on black student retention and graduation rates. Brown University, for example, although troubled by racial incidents, is famous for its efforts to make its campus a comfortable place for African Americans students. In contrast, the University of California has had its share of racial uproar in past years. The small number of black students on campus as a

result of the abolishment of race-sensitive admissions has made many African Americans on campus feel unwelcome (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2005/2006).

### Programs for Preparation

Many of the colleges and universities with high African American student graduation rates have set in place orientation and retention programs to help black students adapt to the culture of predominantly white campuses. Mentoring programs for black first-year students involving upperclassmen have been successful at many colleges and universities ("Black Student," 2005/2006). Historically, mentoring and mentoring programs in higher education have proven to be valuable in promoting interaction between students and faculty (Wright & Wright, 1987). Other institutions appear to improve graduation rates through strong black student organizations that foster a sense of belonging among the African-American student population ("Black Student," 2005/2006). Moreover, by placing African American males into mentoring programs, the chances of persistence and graduation are enhanced. Mentoring has become a very important tool to help guide African American males to complete a college education (Lavant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997).

### Geographic

Geographic location plays a major role in black student graduation rates. For example, Bates College in Maine is located in a rural area with a very small African American population. Similarly, institutions like Grinnell College in Iowa, Oberlin College in Ohio, and Carleton College in Minnesota struggle with low numbers of black students enrolled in their institutions. African American student graduation rates at most

of these rural institutions are lower than the colleges and universities in urban areas (“Black Student,” 2005/2006).

### College Community

The presence of a strong and relatively large core of African American students on campus is important. Institutions that tend to have a low percentage of African Americans in their student bodies tend to have lower black student graduation rates. Black students who attend these schools may have problems adjusting to college life in an overwhelmingly white environment. These institutions are less likely to have black-oriented social or cultural events to make black students feel more welcome (“Black Student,” 2005/2006).

### Curriculum

Curriculum plays an important role in graduation rates. Carnegie Mellon University and California Tech are oriented toward the science fields in which African American students have always had a low enrollment. This continues to be true at many prestigious colleges and universities, black students in the sciences often have been made to feel uncomfortable by white faculty and administrators who persist in beliefs that African Americans students do not have the intellectual capacity to succeed in these demanding disciplines (“Black Student,” 2005/2006).

### Dropout Rates

High dropout rates appear to be mainly caused by poor elementary and secondary preparation as well as an absence of other family members attending college, conditions that apply to a large percentage of today's college-bound African American students. But

equally important considerations are family wealth and the availability of financial aid (“Black Student,” 2005/2006). According to Thomas (1994):

Significant numbers of low-income, first generation minority undergraduates are academically talented, and, with the appropriate preparation and nurturing, they have the potential to enter and succeed in graduate education. However, [they] are not aware that graduate education is a viable option for them, nor are they fully prepared to enter the graduate admissions pipeline. (Background & Purpose section¶ 1)

A college education costs a lot of money. Not only are expenses great for tuition, books, and travel, but, even more important, going to college tends to take students out of the work force for four or more years. The total amount of expenses can cost a family about \$160,000 or more per student depending on location of the college or university. High and always increasing college costs tend to produce much greater difficulties for black families (“Black Student,” 2005/2006). According to the St. John (1998):

The largest nonprofit provider of federal and private education loan funds in this country, 69 percent of African Americans who enrolled in college but did not finish said that they left college because of high student loan debt as opposed to 43 percent of white students who cited the same reason. (p.1)

Many minorities do indeed come from families with low financial incomes, and if an institution is committed to improving its minority representation, one good way to do so is to make sure minority students receive the money needed to attend (LaVeist et al., 2003). Some colleges and universities are able to provide greater financial aid than others, and this is a major factor in student graduation rates. Well-funded universities

such as Princeton, which has the nation's largest endowment per student and probably the nation's most generous financial aid program for low-income students, will certainly claim an advantage in African American student retention and, subsequently, produce higher graduation rates. Clearly, the availability of a high level of financial aid protects low-income African American students from financial troubles that may force minority students to leave college to fulfill family obligations and financial responsibilities (“Black Student,” 2005/2006).

Low graduation rates also happen at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) due to a number of reasons. Many of the students enrolled at these institutions are first generation college students and they come from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2005/2006) states that:

In addition, the black colleges on the whole have very small and totally inadequate endowments. They often lack the resources necessary to generate funds for student financial aid. Often they are unable to furnish sufficient aid packages for upperclassmen to permit them to stay in school. This circumstance appears to be a major factor in accounting for the low black student graduation rate at these schools. But probably the most important explanation for the high dropout rate at the black colleges is the fact that large numbers of African-American Historically Black Colleges and Universities students do not come to college with strong academic preparation and study habits. The graduation results at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities are worsened by the fact that flagship universities in the southern states often tend to shuttle the lowest-

performing black applicants into the state-controlled black colleges in their state.  
(pp. 95 & 96)

### Family Motivation

Cultural and family issues bear a huge responsibility within African American families. These issues can range anywhere from financial problems, lack of encouragement from other members, or the lack of higher education experience from family members. Consistently, the critical problem is that a large amount of young African American men are entering college and universities with insufficient academic credentials, ambition, and study habits (Sonnenberg, 2004). Most of these African American male students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have little family support or motivation, due to the fact that these students are first generation, the first in their family to attend college. These students lack family members or friends who are knowledgeable about graduate education and do not receive support and encouragement to pursue further study (Thomas, 1994).

### Gender Gap: Men vs. Women

When educators discuss the greatest diversity challenges these days, many focus on the recruitment and retention of black male students. At many campuses, two-thirds of black students are female, and the lack of black men engenders many troubling questions.

Findings suggest that the gender gap amongst African American college students is not a new issue. The gap continues to expand in areas such as access, achievement, and important college and graduate school preparation behaviors. “This portends even lower attainment rates for black males in the future,” said the lead author of the report,

Walter R. Allen, UCLA professor of education and of sociology and holder of the Allan Murray Carter Chair in Higher Education (Engel, 2005).

When the number of African American men in college do not reach a certain level, the college community is usually seen as lacking at best. The small number of black men also affects African American women in at least three ways. First, the lack of African-American men usually contributes to the failure to reach this “critical mass” of African-American students to have a viable coeducational cultural presence. Second, the significant imbalance of women-to-men makes normal social interactions difficult within the African-American college community. Third, the lack of African-American men in college translates to a shortage of college-educated African-American men, which has equally important negative consequences for the social life of African-American female college graduates (Cujyet, 2006). Research by Engle (2005) suggests that:

Over the past 33 years, African American women have enrolled in four-year colleges and universities at higher rates than have African American men, according to the results of a new study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. In 2004, black women comprised 59.3 percent of all first-time, full-time black students attending four-year institutions, compared to 54.5 percent in 1971. (p.1)

Recent graduation rates for African American women depicts a noticeable gain over time. For example, black women college completion rates went from 34% in 1990 to 46% in the year 2005 (“Black Student,” 2005/2006). Studies have also shown that among black freshmen, males have higher intellectual self-confidence ratings than

females. Nevertheless, African American women attending both historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly white institutions (PWIs) were significantly more likely than African American men to enter college with an “A” average. Over time, the gender gap in achievement at college/university entry has widened at both PWIs (3% difference between men and women in 1971 and 14% difference in 2004) and HBCUs (6% difference in 1971 between men and women and 12% difference in 2004) (Engle, 2005).

Each year from 1998 through 2000, there was a 1% decline in the graduation rates for African American men. However, for the past four years the graduation rates for black men improved by 1% and now stands at 35%. Over the past 15 years African American males have improved their graduation rate from 28% to 35% (“Black Student,” 2005/2006). In comparing the two statistics that suggests the improvement percentages of both African American male and female, it is noticeable that the female graduation rate over 10 years was significantly better, being 12% in contrast to 7% for the males.

While other race-ethnic groups have revealed a gender gap in college participation, the pattern where women enroll in college at higher rates than males has been a long-established pattern amongst African Americans. Still, the gap continues to grow at a rapid pace, foretelling lower attainment rates for Black males (Engel, 2005).

### Theoretical Framework

In theory this study is influenced by Cross’ theory of Nigrescence. Student achievement depends upon their level of development and knowing who they are. How can one focus on academic achievement when they are faced with issues that affect their everyday life?



### *Theory of Nigrescence*

In the early 1970s William Cross developed a theory that dealt with African American students dealing with their blackness or becoming black, the theory of Nigrescence. This theory focused on five to six stages that African American students undergo. These stages of development tend to happen on three major levels, first the pre-encounter stage, then encounter, and finally post-encounter.

During the pre-encounter stage, race is somewhat unimportant to the individual, they do not see their own blackness as a benefit for them or their culture, but more as a detriment. Community values and notions of what it means to be black governs an individual's sense of self. In other words, individuals on this level display extensive identification with the dominant white culture and, in some instances, express dislike for black culture. In general, someone who identifies with this stage has a poor or negative impression of what it means to be black, if not a negative self-image (Duncan, 2005). "The Black child absorbs many beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the idea that it is better to be White" (Tatum, 1997, p. 5). Some researchers state that, "self-denigration and admiration of Euro-American conceptions of normalcy transcend class distinctions among Pre-Encounter racial minorities in that these world views are the same for both lower and middle classes" (Duncan, 2005, p.7). According to Tatum (1997):

The stereotypes, omissions, and distortions that reinforce notions of White superiority are breathed in by Black children as well as White. Simply as a function of being socialized in a Eurocentric culture, some Black children may begin to value the role models, lifestyle, and images of beauty represented by the

dominant group more highly than those of their own cultural group. (p.55)

Most students tend not to enter the next stage until they encounter an event that makes them confront questions of race in society. This encounter of an event forces the student to reconsider their own status as a black person in America, and this may result in what Duncan likes to call double consciousness. “As I use the term here, ‘double consciousness’ refers to the debilitating psychological conflict that W.E.B. Du Bois claimed divided the Negro-American self: two thoughts, two unrecognizable stirrings, two warring ideals in one black body” (Duncan, 2005, p.7). For example, Tatum points out in a section from her book about Malcolm X and his transition into the encounter stage. Malcolm was a junior in high school and was an A student and he was also president of his class. One day he had a conversation with his English teacher concerning his future goals, and he told the teacher that he wanted to be a lawyer. His teacher responded, “That’s no realistic goal for a nigger,” and told Malcolm to consider carpentry instead. Basically what was said was you are a Black male, and the racial group you belong to matters. Malcolm’s emotional response was anger, confusion, and alienation. He stopped participating in class, he withdrew himself from his white classmates, and finally he moved from the predominately white town in Michigan to live with his sister in Roxbury, a black community in Boston (Tatum, 1997). This tends to happen with a lot of African American students who encounter an event that makes them realize that racial identity is an issue in this country they do exactly what Malcolm X did, they come across feelings of anger, they are confused because they never experienced an event like this, and then they alienate themselves from those different from them.

Nineteen identity models break down the in-between phase that students may choose to reassert their own identification with the dominant culture. On the other hand, these encounters may be offensive and they may extricate students from their color-blind perspectives. If this were to happen, individuals may resort to uncritically accepting everything associated with African American culture and rejecting all institutions and values associated with the dominant culture (Duncan, 2005).

For instance, some researchers note that the encounter stage explains the so called “self-segregation” of the black youth in junior high and high school. They theorize that black peer groups are reassuring to their members because they can give answers to confusing questions that relate to race and identity, questions that white peers and not even adult family members can adequately address (Duncan, 2005). Duncan (2005) found that:

Beverly Tatum writes black youth, “know how to be black. They have absorbed the stereotypical images of black youth in the popular culture and are reflecting those images in their self-presentation.” Further, she notes, “joining with one’s peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. What is problematic is that the young people are operating on a very limited definition of what it means to be black, based largely on cultural stereotype.” (p. 8)

A lot of students remain in the encounter stage very few of them move on to the next level which is post-encounter. On this level individuals come to terms with their cultures in ways that do not essentially involve discarding the dominant culture or white culture. They develop positive views and start to appreciate the black culture, which is rooted in lived conditions, which, in addition, includes the growth of personal criteria for

what it means to be black. Also in the post-encounter level, individuals start to combine different aspects of their identities to attain stability across domains of human activity. Additionally, students who are on this level tend to be less reactionary and they normally refocus their energy from meaningless anger and hostility toward different individuals and groups that they distinguish to be different and they direct their aggression against racist and oppressive groups or institutions. These individuals sometimes move to a higher level in which they exceed “ethnicity” and take on a more multicultural or world wide identity (Duncan, 2005).

#### Summary of the Literature Review

The African American male graduate student is an endangered species. Even though statistics have shown great improvement over the last couple of years, there is still much to be done in order to get the population of African American male students higher, in terms of post secondary education particularly graduate school. This ethnic group of black male students face many challenges that constrains their pursuit of higher education. Most of these constraints deal with life situations such as being from a low SES background, being a first generation college student, not getting the family support other students get, and not having the proper education at the K-12 levels. As a result, there are less African American male students pursuing higher education, where as the African American female population is steadily increasing, out numbering the male students by a noticeable margin. More research is needed to explore what can motivate the African American male population to pursue higher education especially at the graduate school level.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Context of the Study

This study was conducted at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. In 1923, Rowan University started as a normal school to train elementary school teachers and since then has developed into a comprehensive regional university. Rowan University is a medium sized public university located in the southern region of New Jersey. Rowan offers a total of 71 undergraduate majors, 35 teacher certification programs, 51 master's degree programs and a doctoral program in educational leadership (www.rowan.edu, 2007).

Rowan University enrolls more than 10,091 students who represent the Mid-Atlantic States and 30 foreign countries. In total, there are 8,918 undergraduate students, of which 7,681 are full-time students and 1,237 are part-time. There are 1,149 graduate students enrolled in the academic year. Rowan considers itself to be an ethnically diverse campus, consisting of 7,901 White, 852 Black, 670 Hispanic, 323 Asian, 308 Unknown, and 37 American Indian/Native students. Each year Rowan University enrolls roughly 1,556 freshmen students and there are more than 150 clubs/organizations on campus that offer students, professional, cultural, and service activities to promote involvement on the campus (www.rowan.edu, 2007).

## Population and Sample Selection

The target population for this study were all African American male graduate students enrolled in a master and/or a doctoral program in New Jersey. The available population were all African American male graduate students enrolled in Rowan Universities' masters and doctor programs. To participate in the study, participants had to be an African American male currently enrolled in a masters or doctoral program at Rowan University. Currently at Rowan University there are 28 African American male students enrolled in graduate school. Approximately 25% of these student participants were interviewed about their experiences as a graduate student as well as their motivation to pursue graduate level education. At the end of the interviews participants were ask to fill out a brief demographic survey that further helped to understand their personal experiences.

In order to insure the rights of each subject, an Institutional Review Broad (IRB) application was submitted on December 5, 2007 (Appendix A). The application included interview questions (Appendix D), a demographic survey (Appendix C) and the interview consent form (Appendix B). Once the application received approval, participants were asked to read and sign the consent form before participating in the interview process. Overall, there were eight African American male students enrolled in Rowan's graduate school that participated in this study.

## Instrumentation

This study had two types of instrumentation, an interview schedule (Appendix D) and a demographic survey (Appendix C). The purpose of the interview was to find out how current African American male graduate students experienced graduate school at

Rowan University, and what motivated them to pursue higher levels of education. The survey served the purpose of obtaining background information about the participants. Potential participants were solicited by phone calls, and through email. The interview questions were developed using knowledge based information formulated from the works of Kendal Richards (2007) and Dr. James Coaxum III with some editing done by the researcher based upon a review of relevant literature. The survey was developed by Kendal Richards (2007) with editing by the researcher. Content and face validity of the instrument were obtained through review by faculty experts in the Educational Leadership Department at Rowan University.

The interviews were conducted in person; all participants completed the interview process. The interviews were conducted in a quiet and stable environment that allowed confidentiality including, the university library, the participant's room and a campus office that was secured to conduct interviews for the study. The interviews were designed to last for approximately 20 to 30 minutes; some exceeded this time limit depending on how they answered the question. The interview questions focused on how selected African American males describe their experiences in graduate school at Rowan University as well as, what factors motivated and influenced these particular African American males to pursue higher and graduate level education. These questions also focused on issues associated with African American males who attend graduate school. Also what recommendations would selected African American males make to encourage more African American males to pursue higher education.

The survey consisted of 11 questions, which served the purpose of retrieving further information to better understand issues and characteristics that helped the participating subjects in their educational success.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Following the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Rowan University (Appendix A), all of the selected African American male graduate students, who participated in this study, were asked to read and sign a letter of consent (Appendix B) so they knew the nature of the study. Most of the interviews were conducted in the privacy of the researcher's office and in the university library in the private rooms to assure confidentiality. The interview process took no longer than 20-30 minutes depending on the subject's responses to the questions. The interviews were tape recorded and the participant's answers to the interview questions were recorded by the researcher and prepared for analysis. With completion of the interviews a demographic survey was administered to the participants. The purpose of the survey was explained to the subjects and they were asked to complete and return the survey to the researcher for analysis. Upon returning the survey the students were reassured once again that the surveys would remain strictly confidential.

#### Data Analysis

The interviews provided qualitative information concerning how selected African American males describe their experience in graduate school at Rowan University. Also what factors motivate and influence these African American males to pursue higher levels of education. Moreover, these questions supplied qualitative data on issues that are associated with African American males who attend graduate school, as well as



recommendations these subjects would make to encourage more African American males to pursue higher education. The goal of the interviews was to obtain insights on the experiences, more importantly the influential foundation that helped this group of African American males become graduate students, persist and succeed in graduate school. The qualitative data were analyzed and transcribed using a content analysis procedure to find common themes in participants' responses (Sisco, 1981).

The demographic survey offered quantitative data that were used to better understand different concerns and characteristics that helped the participants in their educational success. These data were analyzed using the Statistical Packaging for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software to calculate the descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

#### Profile of the Sample

The participants of this study consisted of African American male graduate students who were selected through a purposive sampling process. Of the 28 African American male graduate students enrolled at Rowan University during the 2007/08 academic year, eight interviews were conducted. Most of the students who participated in the study come from backgrounds of limited education within their family structure.

Table 4.1 shows that a majority of the participants were between the ages of 21-25 (50%). Additionally, the highest level of education earned from the participants was a bachelor's degree (62.5%). Also 100% reported having more than one sibling in their family, and 87.5% reported having both older and younger siblings. Other findings indicated that 50% of subject's siblings either are attending college or have college degrees, whereas 37.5%, reported siblings with just a high school diploma. Furthermore, the highest level of education the participant's fathers completed was high school (87.5%). Whereas, 62.5% of the participants' mothers highest level of education was a high school diploma. Fifty percent of the participants indicating realizing as undergraduates that they wanted to pursue graduate study. Seventy five percent reported that mentors were a contributing factor to success in graduate school. Moreover, persistence was the most important trait for educational attainment amongst these student participants (50%).

Table 4.1

*Selected Demographics*

Variable		n=8 Frequency	%
<b>Age</b>			
	21-25	4	50
	25-30	1	12.5
	30-35	0	0
	35-Older	3	37.5
	Total	8	100
<b>Highest Academic Degree</b>			
	Bachelors	5	62.5
	Masters	3	37.5
	Doctorates	0	0
	Total	8	100
<b>Highest Level of Father's Education</b>			
	No Formal Edu	0	0
	Elementary	0	0
	Some Middle or High School	0	0
	High School Grad	7	87.5
	Associates Degree	0	0
	Bachelors Degree	0	0
	Some Post-Grad	1	12.5
	Master's Degree	0	0
	Other	0	0
	Total	8	100
<b>Highest Level of Mother's Education</b>			
	No Formal Edu	0	0
	Elementary	0	0
	Some Middle or High School	0	0
	High School Grad	5	62.5

	Associates Degree	1	12.5
	Bachelors Degree	1	12.5
	Some Post-Grad	0	0
	Master's Degree	1	12.5
	Other	0	0
	Total	8	100
Year Decided to Get Masters			
	Freshman	1	12.5
	Sophomore	0	0
	Junior	2	25
	Senior	4	50
	Other	1	12.5
	Total	8	100
Most Contributing Factor to Grad School Success			
	Mentor	6	75
	Parents	2	25
	Peers	0	0
	Other	0	0
	Total	8	100
Most Important Trait for Educational Success			
	Honesty	0	0
	Persistence	4	50
	Shrewdnesss	0	0
	Loyalty	0	0
	Determination	3	37.5
	Diplomacy	0	0
	Leadership	0	0
	Other (Integrity)	1	12.5
	Total	8	100

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### Biographical Information

Participant number one was raised in a low SES neighborhood that was mostly populated by African and Hispanic Americans. As a youth he realized early on that he

wanted to better himself. He would see others in his community doing nothing with their lives and he did not want the same fate for himself. Being in the middle of six children, three older and two younger, one may think that participant number one would have some good role models to look up to, but that was not the case. His three older siblings only received a high school diploma, so they did not supply participant number one with much motivation as a youth. Both his mother and father only received high school diplomas as well, so there was no foundation of postsecondary education present. During his early childhood years, his grandmother was his main means of support and she encouraged him to do positive things with his life. Even as an adult she still remains his only support system as he continues his education.

As an undergraduate student participant number one's background had a significant affect on him obtaining his degree. He remembered how people struggled in his community and "I didn't want that to be me... didn't want to end up like that." That was his mentality, that was a contributing factor to helping him obtain his undergraduate degree and that is what is driving him to get a masters degree. Being an African American male graduate student at a predominantly white institution (PWI), it was tough for participant number one to make the transition due to the low numbers of minorities at Rowan. "Being the only black male in class is very hard, very strange feeling, it's tough to describe."

Participant number two came from a middle class mainly white community. His neighborhood really had no impact on his educational aspirations. However, within his community the church played a big role, "Church gave me faith that I can accomplish any goal I set my mind to." As a youth, participant number two had strong support coming

from his family. His parents gave him much support, his older sister was someone he could look up to and his uncle was like a second father to him, always teaching.

Participant number comes from a strong educational background. His father completed some post-graduate, and his mother completed her graduate studies. Both of his siblings have attended college, so he is deeply rooted in education. As an adult student, Rowan's Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program became his new support system. By being actively involved with the EOF program, he was heavily influenced by this organization. "I seen how EOF helps minority students, I realized they were there for me."

During participant number two's undergraduate studies, his background influenced his educational success. He comes from a family of educators, and they instilled in him at a young age that education was very important. His family encouraged him to do better and motivated him to continue. "Dropping out, not getting a degree wasn't an option." Even now with his graduate studies, because of this solid foundation that his family built he now motivates himself, "Getting a graduate degree is just as important as getting my undergrad." Being raised in a white community, not much has changed for participant number two in terms of coming to Rowan. Nevertheless, he shares the same views as participant number one in that they both feel as though there are low numbers of African American males in graduate school at Rowan. "I feel as though I have to represent African American males. My mother told me I have a voice in and out-of-the classroom and others won't understand what that voice is unless I speak up."

Participant number three came from a poor, urban community. His community had a negative influence on his educational aspirations and goals. Participant number three comes from a family with limited education. His father's highest level of education

was earning a high school diploma, and his mother has some college experience, completing and getting her associate's degree. As a youth he would see people in his neighborhood "On the corner" doing nonproductive things. His main source of support as a youth was his mother. She pushed him to get through school, provided him with all the resources he needed, and showed him the importance of education and higher education as well. Being an adult student, his mother still plays an important role in his educational success. Another support system that he established was with his mentor at his undergraduate institution. "She took me under her wing, showed me the steps to get into grad school, and how to get through the GREs." Even to this day he still keeps in touch with her.

Participant number three's background had a major role in his efforts to obtain his undergraduate degree. After moving from the poor neighborhood to a more suburban area, he decided he wanted to make his mother proud, and set personal goals for himself. Being the oldest of three, "I felt I had to be a good role model for my younger brother and sister." Both his siblings are benefitting from their brothers success, his younger brother currently 20 years of age is in college and his younger sister is in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade but she has two family members whom she can look to for guidance.

One of his goals was to continue to pursue a master's degree. "I had to go for it, it felt like I had to get my masters; it was something I had to do." Even though participant number three is atypical of the African American male, people do not believe he is in graduate school. "People on this campus don't realize that I am a grad student, because I look young and I am an African American male."

Participant four was raised in a high poverty poor community. Growing up he was subjected to negative peer pressure, so he viewed his neighborhood, not so much as having a negative affect, but more of a positive one on his educational ambitions. Similar to participant one, number four's neighborhood helped and drove him to want more in life. Being the third oldest of four children he is not the only one to attend college. All of his siblings have attended and completed college and his older sister also went on to pursue a master's degree. Both of his parent's highest level of education was completing high school. Even though participant four's mother had limited knowledge about college she still was his main support system when he was younger. She was a single parent raising four children, so he had to get an education and go to college to help support her and the family. "She didn't have the funds to send me to college, so I knew I had to go to help out." She also supported him when it came to school and athletics. As an adult, participant four's most influential support system is his mentor. He gave him advice and prepared him for life after undergraduate studies.

Participant four's background contributed to him completing undergraduate studies. "My background made me stronger; I was able to overcome obstacles in my neighborhood so when the pressure was on in school I was able to handle it." As a graduate student, his undergraduate experience prepared him for what lay ahead. "I had to continue because I know I could be successful." Being an African American male at a PWI, participant four also recognized the low numbers of minorities in the graduate program. "I see a real lack of African American males in this program and it's disheartening."



Unlike the others, participant number five moved around a lot as a youth, living on military bases in and out-of-the country. So he was exposed to many different types of lifestyles. His community really had no impact on his educational goals. Being from a military background there was always an expectation for him, "School came easy for me." Being the middle child, he was the only one of the three children that went to college. Both of his parents also never went to college. When he was young his mother became his most influential source of support, she raised him and his two brothers after his parents split. As an adult his support system shifted to his mentor, "He was very influential in my college career."

As an undergraduate student, participant five's background helped to create educational expectations for him. "Growing up I knew I was going to college, I didn't go right away but I always knew I was going." His mother gave him an EOF application and advised him to fill it out so that the university would help pay for school. Even though his background had a pretty strong impact on his undergraduate studies, as a graduate student his mentor played the biggest role. Participant five's over all experience in graduate school at Rowan University was a good one. Even though his experience was good he would often notice the lack of African American students in the program. "Majority of the people in my classes were not students of color, so it was interesting because when I would speak in class the older classmates would look at me like who are you."

Participant number six lived in a poor urban community in West Philly. As a youth his community had no affect on his educational aspirations. Participant number six is the second oldest of eight children. Despite his father having a high school diploma

and his mother having a bachelor's degree, growing up he had no real source of support, "No one told me about college, high school was as far as it went." He had no long term goals until his junior year in high school. "My teacher gave me some hope and finally I started to think maybe I can do something after high school." Five of participant six's siblings attended college and three of them actually received a master's degree, and the other two siblings have a high school diploma. Unlike his childhood, participant number six, acquired a mentor, and that person is now his most influential support system. "At first I really didn't have one, but one day I ran into him and he is the one I look to for support, he is a role model for me." On a larger scale, Barack Obama and also young African American males doing positive things like getting a masters have become both an inspiration and a support system for him.

Unlike many of the other subjects, participant six's background was a hindrance. He attended community college before transferring to a four year institution, due to low SAT scores. "Community college just let me in; I had no basic skills at the time." Upon completing undergraduate studies, he entered the Marine Corp and also worked at a fortune 500 company. There he realized that everyone in the company was moving up because they had attained advance degrees so "I felt like in order for me to get ahead, I have to get a masters degree too. This was a great opportunity for me because I could get the Marines to pay for it." Though he continued on with education, participant six, just as the other participants noticed a discouraging but common trend, that there was a shortage of African American males, not only in Rowan's program, but graduate programs across the nation. "It's sad that there are not more African American males in the program."

Participant seven comes from a poor community, where the people in his neighborhood had an impact on his educational aspirations. Coming from a family of five children he is the only one that pursued college. Both of his parents highest level of education is a high diploma. Growing up his grandmother was his main source of support, "She was very instrumental and involved in my life growing up. My mom was there, but it was my grandmother that got me through." As an adult his inspiration are young people, "They give me the support I need to continue on so I can better myself for them." Participant seven's background really had no impact in terms of him obtaining a bachelor's degree. "I am motivated by young people, and my reasoning in continuing my education is that I can't tell young students to go down a road that I haven't experienced." So as a graduate student he maintains this way of thinking, "I must be a positive role model for these students, so I have to do something positive."

Participant number eight comes from a suburban, middle class background. When he moved to the suburbs the community helped him see how important school was. "Moving definitely helped me focus on my education." Being the middle child, his older sibling has a college degree and his younger brother plans on attending college after he completes high school. Both his parents' level of education does not exceed that of a high school diploma. As a youth his mother was his most significant source of support. "My mother always backed me and my brothers up with whatever we wanted to do. She told us to dream high and aim high and never fall short of our goals." Even now as an adult, his mother still remains his main support system.

As an undergraduate student his background helped him to obtain his bachelor's degree. He was very disciplined as a student/worker. "At a young age I had to get a job

to have another source of income for the family. I was good with time management with work and school.” Once he went to college it was easy for him to make the transition. Now, as a graduate student his background helped to create a foundation to be more disciplined and ready to take on the challenges of the next level. Like some of the other participants, he feels that his experience as an African American male graduate student is a good experience, but it is still very challenging.

### Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do selected African American males describe their experience in graduate school at Rowan University?

Table 4.2 provides information in regards to research question 1. The table shows how African American males describe their experience, and how they are perceived on Rowan’s campus.

Table 4.2 represents the responses transcribed from the interview questions. Overall, participants had mixed feelings about their experiences at Rowan University as African American male graduate students. Fifty percent reported having a good graduate experience at Rowan. The other 50% reported to having a hard time in reference to graduate school being challenging, and “making the transition.” Seven out-of-eight participants reported to the lack of African American males in graduate programs at Rowan, which seemed to have a negative impact on their experience. Participant three noted, “My experience at Rowan is a good one, but I see a lack of African American male students in the program.” The perception of how African American males in graduate school are perceived on the Rowan University campus was mixed with, 37.5% reported not knowing. Whereas, 50% stated that they are seen in a positive image, and

12.5% reported a negative viewpoint. “I feel like the professors dummy things down for me or give African American males too much attention as if to say we don’t understand the material,” is the way participant number four summed up his experience at Rowan.

Table 4.2

*African American Male Graduate Student Experience*

Variable		n=8 Frequency	%
Experience			
	Good Experience	4	50
	Hard Times	4	50
	Total	8	100
Perception			
	Not Knowing	3	37.5
	Positive Image	4	50
	Negative Image	1	12.5
	Total	8	100

Research Question 2: What are the motivating factors that influenced selected African American males to pursue graduate school?

In response to the research question, participants were asked “What factors contributed to your success in graduate school?” Fifty percent answered that mentors were the driving force in their success. The same 50% also responded that family and peers supplied them with success as African American male graduate students. Other factors that helped to motivate and contribute to the persistence of the participants were determination, role models, “not messing up my graduate assistantship” (incentives), maturity, hard work, dedication, and self motivation. In relationship to research question

2, participants were also asked “Why do you think it is important to attend graduate school?” Five out-of-the eight participants (62.5%) stated that getting a master’s was important because the bachelor’s degree is not enough anymore. One participant noted, “It’s losing its worth; you have to keep up with others in the nation.” These participants reported that the master’s degree is needed in order to compete in today’s society. “The masters gets your foot in the door, it’s the next step to get ahead, before it was the high school diploma, now it’s the bachelor’s, a masters gets you ahead.” Others reported that, graduate programs are there so utilize them, they give opportunities to grow and develop oneself, undergraduate is not enough. An additional response focused on the importance of being a role model, which helped to motivate the continuation of education as well.

Research Question 3: What issues are associated with African American males who attend graduate school?

Table 4.3 provides information in regards to research question 3. The table shows obstacles/challenges that selected African American males encountered at Rowan, and their greatest strengths in being able to persevere in graduate school.

Table 4.3 represents the responses transcribed from the interview questions. With regards to research question 3, participants were asked “As an African American male graduate student, what obstacles, or challenges do you encounter at Rowan University?” Overall, participants faced many different obstacles, and challenges at Rowan University. Thirty seven point five percent indicated that social aspects, such as trying to relate to classmates, getting points across as the only African American male in class, being singled out, were challenges that caused problems. One participant captured the challenges this way: “Not attending undergraduate here, and having the availability of

a mentor, and not seeking out a mentor create disadvantages being the only African American male in classes.” Moreover, 25% reported that time was an obstacle they faced. “Being a full-time employee makes it hard to take classes that start at 4p.m., when I get off work normally at 6p.m. I need to get special permission from my boss, and sometimes I can’t.” Twelve point five percent reported having weak writing skills. Additionally, 12.5% acknowledged being undermined by others as an obstacle that he faced. “People always test my credibility about my knowledge in this field. Being an African American male, people are always testing what I know and what I am willing to learn. It’s been a struggle for me to adapt.” Another participant reported to not having any problems. In relation to research question 3, participants were also asked, “What do you see as your greatest strength in being able to persevere in your graduate education?” There were a variety of different responses to this question. Thirty seven point five percent responded that their greatest strength was being able to persevere and continue on. “I am very driven; life experiences allow me to push on no matter what.” Other participants noted issues of being competitive, being creative, writing abilities/skills, communication, and being a well balanced individual.

Table 4.3

*Issues Associated with African American male Graduate Students*

Variable	n=8 Frequency	%
Obstacles/Challenges		
Social Aspects	3	37.5
Time	2	25
Under preparedness	1	12.5
Undermined	1	12.5

	No Challenges	1	12.5
	Total	8	100
Greatest Strength			
	Being Competitive	1	12.5
	Perseverance	3	37.5
	Creativity	1	12.5
	Writing Abilities	1	12.5
	Communication	1	12.5
	Well-Balanced	1	12.5
	Total	8	100

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Research Question 4: What recommendations would selected African American males make to encourage more African American males to pursue higher education?

Participants were asked, “What do you think needs to change to help more African American males obtain advance degrees?” Fifty percent of the participants stated that having more people in the public eye like them, meaning more African American males in positive positions, to model after. One participant stated, “We need more role models informing young African American men that they can do it. Teach young African American males to get, to value, and to nurture education.” Another responded that more programs and mentors are needed to encourage persistence. Others stated that the perception of graduate school needs to change, “Information process, this information needs to be put out to African American males, that it is possible that they can do it. If he can do, so can I.” Participants were also asked, “What would you change in the process to facilitate more African American males obtaining educational success?” There was an assortment of responses with 25% stating that disseminating information about the value of education and making sure that people are getting the proper knowledge on how they



can go to graduate school. “We need to change the outreach, getting the word about grad school out there, a lot of African American males just don’t know about it.” Other responses from participants were having more programs as undergraduates explaining what graduate school is all about, have more role models to motivate young African American males to aim high, looking at the educational pipeline, and rewards for young African American men for being educationally sound, networking more with other African American males to encourage and make graduate school more available for them, and finally letting African American males know that they have the same opportunities and abilities as others to acquire advanced degrees.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary of the Study

Completing graduate school has become more important than ever. More jobs are requiring applicants to have a master's degree and this creates a major concern for African American males. Not surprising, many African American men are in an uncertain position when it comes to persistence in higher education, specifically graduate school. The declining numbers of African American males attending and graduating from college are distressing not only because of the immediate implications for the men themselves, but because many African American male students enter college socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged (Wilson, 2000). Many of these young males internalize these feelings and develop an inferior view of their own abilities and aspirations as compared to others (Cuyjet, 1997).

The study investigated how selected African American males described their experience in graduate school at Rowan University as well as what factors motivated and influenced participants to pursue graduate school. Moreover, the study sought to look at the issues associated with African American males who attend graduate school. Ultimately, the study examined what recommendations selected African American males made to encourage more African American males to pursue higher education.

## Methodology

The population in this study consisted of 28 African American graduate students enrolled in the masters and doctoral program at Rowan University. Of the 28, eight students participated in the interview process. To assure the rights of the student participants, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application (Appendix A) was submitted in December 2007. The application included interview questions (Appendix D), a demographic survey (Appendix C) and an interview consent form (Appendix B). The application was approved by the IRB on January 2, 2008. Following the approval, participants were asked to read and sign the consent form before participating in the interview process.

Two instruments were used in the data collection process. An interview schedule (Appendix D) was the main instrument used to collect data. Questions were developed using the works of Kendal Richards (2007) and Dr. James Coaxum III with some editing done by the researcher based upon a review of relevant literature. A demographic survey (Appendix C) was used to obtain background information about the participants. The survey was developed by Kendal Richards (2007) with editing by the researcher.

The majority of interviews were conducted in privacy. The interview process took no longer than 20-30 minutes depending on the responses of the participants. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher. With completion of the interviews a demographic survey was administered to the participants. Participants were assured that the surveys and interview process would remain strictly confidential.

## Data Analysis

The interviews provided qualitative information about how selected African American male graduate students experienced graduate school at Rowan University. Also, the study probed what factors motivated and influenced the participants to pursue higher levels of education. Moreover, the study obtained recommendations about how to recruit more African American males to pursue higher education.

The objective of the interview process was to attain insights on the experiences, notably the significant groundwork that helped the selected African American males become graduate students, persevere, and succeed in graduate school. The data were analyzed and transcribed using a content analysis procedure to find common themes in participants' responses (Sisco, 1981).

The demographic survey obtained quantitative data that were used to enhance the understanding of different concerns and characteristics that facilitated the participants in their educational success. This data were analyzed using SPSS computer software to calculate the descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages.

## Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1: How do selected African American males describe their experience in graduate school at Rowan University?

Participants reported having different reactions to their experience at Rowan University. Responses were split down the middle; half said that their experiences at Rowan were good while the other half described them as being tough/hard and challenging. All but one reported to seeing a lack of African American males in the graduate programs at Rowan University. This seemed to create a pessimistic disposition

on the participants. For example, participant number six stated that “[His experience] is great, it’s great to work as a grad student with the different course work, but it’s sad that there aren’t more African American males in the program to share these same experiences.” These finding support previous research by Fleming (2005), who stated:

Responses to questions about graduate school experience range from very positive to very negative with many citing isolation and respect from faculty as big issues to deal with and/or overcome. For example, Soloman stated, “My graduate school experience was definitely a journey! I faced many challenges. My ability was constantly questioned. I was (only black male) and felt almost totally isolated at the institution and in the program. No black faculty at the time and my advisor did not provide any guidance or support. I had to learn to be an independent researcher in order to finish.” (p. 89)

Other research that supports these findings indicates that the significant low numbers of African American male on PWI campuses has an impact on the environment that affects others beyond the African American community (Cuyjet, 2006). Most universities including Rowan want to create a diverse student body, and also encourage the interaction and engagement amongst the faculty, student community, and administration, but by having a lack of African American males on campus mitigates the idea of a diverse campus (Cuyjet, 2006). According to Cuyjet (2006):

If we do not recognize that there are cultural differences between African American men and African American women, particularly as to how they interact with whites, we may tend to overlook the detrimental effect the low number of

African American men on PWI campuses can have on this desired cultural interaction. (p.11)

Not only will the student body benefit from positive interaction by having more African American males on campus, but faculty, staff, and administration will too. By the absence of this particular group, others reinforce stereotypes of African American men from the common media and from what they see on campus, which is a lack of black male students seeking further education (Cuyjet, 2006).

Research Question 2: What are the motivating factors that influenced selected African American males to pursue graduate school?

The findings showed that four out of the eight participants (50%) reported that their main motivating factor to pursue graduate school were mentors. This supports research by Marcellus (2006), who stated “71.4% of the subjects indicated that mentors offered valuable academic advisement. Moreover, 50.3% of the subjects strongly agreed or agreed that they achieved better grades through the assistance of their mentors” (Marcellus 2006, p. 51). Research by Wright and Wright (1987) further corroborates the power of mentors:

That the mentor can help the protégé develop a sense of direction and long-term goals which can promote a successful career... the mentor can give insight into the many unwritten and vague norms that exist in academia. (p.205)

The same four participants also recognized family and peers as contributing to their pursuit of graduate education. “Equally important to the path is educational achievement being emphasized and viewed as important in the family structure” (Fleming, 2005, p. 95). Families play a big role in the education of African American students. Through the

many different challenges and obstacles Black students experience, including racism, stereotyping, and discrimination, parents must be involved in their child's education (Richards, 2007).

Research Question 3: What issues are associated with African American males who attend graduate school?

The participants reported many different responses to this question. Three participants noted that the obstacles they faced were social problems. Participant number five stated that "Not attending undergraduate here, and having the availability of a mentor, and not seeking out a mentor create disadvantages being the only African American male in classes." The findings support the research of Fleming (2005) who quoted one of the participants as saying, "I was the only black male out of a class of 300... I would describe it as a lonely game. Mentoring and support are scarce; you find it where you can. I felt like I was trying to get into the white boy's country club where I was not wanted or even invited" (Fleming, 2005, p.90). Other participants reported time being a challenge for them. Participant number four talked about being a full time employee and not being able to attend classes due to time restraints. Similar to participant four, a subject in Fleming's study was recorded saying, "I had to work the whole time while many colleagues did not need to" (Fleming, 2005, p.92). Participant six noted that he was not prepared properly for the course work at Rowan. This finding supports Cuyjet (1997), who argues that the reason black male representation in college is low because many are underprepared when they arrive on the campus, and this contributes to a higher attrition rate that African American males experience. Another participant noted being undermined by peers and faculty. He found that as an African

American male, people are always testing his knowledge pertaining to his field of study, as if to say he does not know as much as his white counterparts because he is black. These are negative stereotypes that people in higher education develop due to the lack of black males and the lack of interaction with black males on campus. Because of a lack of experience through face-to-face interaction, people form negative perceptions and opinions from what they see in the media, fictionalized entertainment, or films, and these stereotypes are passed on from people-to-people, which creates a sense of falsehood, and that is what people accept until proven otherwise (Cuyjet, 2006).

Research Question 4: What recommendations would selected African American males make to encourage more African American males to pursue higher education?

Half of the participants reported the importance of having more African American males in positive positions, to model after. “We need more role models informing young African American men that they can do it. Teach young African American males to get, to value, and to nurture education.” One participant stated that more programs and mentors are needed to encourage persistence. While others responded by saying, the perception of graduate school needs to change. “Information process, this information needs to be put out to African American males, that it is possible that they can do it. If he can do, so can I.” These findings support the work of Richards (2007) who stated:

It is important for African Americans to see people who are like them and who have similar characteristics perform well academically and act as mentors. In addition, schools, the general public, and the media must make efforts to encourage and promote academic achievement over interests such as athletics and



entertainment. Academic achievement can be enhanced by involving African Americans in the process of educational decision making. (p.66)

Other related responses to the research question were, 25% of the participants reported the importance of making the information about graduate school known, and making sure that people are getting the proper knowledge on how they can go to graduate school. "We need to change the outreach, getting the word about grad school out there, a lot of African American males just don't know about it." Participants also recommended having more information programs as undergraduate students to explain what graduate school is and what it is all about. Also, having more role models for young African American men to look up to and to motivate is critical. Moreover, looking back at the lower levels of education because that is where these students are impressionable, it is vital to help the young people see the value of higher education. Reward young African American men for being academically sound, reach out to other African American males to encourage and make graduate school more available for them, and let Black men know that they have the same opportunities and abilities as others to acquire advance degrees. These findings support previous research done by Fleming (2005) who stated:

It seems that for black males to persist and succeed in college and graduate school it is necessary for them to develop a predisposition for matriculation which may happen early or, late but would be more helpful and culture changing if it could occur early. A number of the subjects referenced the importance of gaining early exposure to college/graduate school through visits, online information, and word-of-mouth communication from friends and peers. This also helped many of the

respondents dispel some of their anxiety and /or misconceptions about higher education. (p.95)

Participants were asked, “Why is it important for African American males to pursue higher education?” Fifty percent stated that getting a master’s degree sets you apart from the rest; it gets you a step ahead of everyone else. Participant number three stated that, “It gives African American males a sense of success, of empowerment, to say that we have overcome the stereotypes and statistics. It puts you in a category of untouchable.” Participant five was recorded as saying, “We need to build a pool of individuals, and if you create this pool or overflow where it is expected then you’re less inclined to say no. If everyone else is doing it then I’ll do it too.” To reinforce this view, Fleming (2005) noted:

Being in an environment whether at school or home that makes college/graduate school seem like a viable option is a very beneficial, if not vital. Black males often have fewer identifiable role models in educational settings and may find it less comfortable approaching faculty and staff who will usually be white and possibly female. Black males are also more likely to be exposed to negative preconceptions about their educational abilities. Higher education institutions along with teacher and other staff must do a better job of making colleges and universities a more inclusive environment. (p. 95)

In addition, all five master’s students noted that upon completion of graduate school they planned on working at institutions of higher learning and to facilitate education for minority students that may struggle academically and financially. Once they establish themselves in the work force all stated that they plan on pursuing doctoral

degrees. As for the three doctoral students in the study, all reported that they plan to teach on the college level once their doctoral degrees are obtained, and continue to educate themselves and others around them.

### Conclusions

Overall, participants viewed the graduate school experience at Rowan University as positive, noting it as necessary for African American males to get ahead in life. Thus, it can be concluded that a bachelor's degree is insufficient if the goal is to get to the next level as another certificate or degree is essential.

Moreover, participants reported that the low number of African American male students enrolled in Rowan Universities' graduate programs, which includes the master's and doctoral program, were very disheartening and disappointing. There are a total of 28 African American male students enrolled in both master's programs and the doctoral program. There are a total of 1,179 graduate students enrolled at Rowan and of the 1,179 only 28 are African American male students, whereas white male counterparts comprise 241 of the total population of graduate students at Rowan (IRP Resource Book, 2007). This should pose a major concern for the university which claims to be dedicated to having a diverse campus. When participants asked the researcher how many interviews were conducted, the participants were shocked to find that there were eight African American male graduate students on campus let alone 28 in total. Based on their own knowledge and what they had experienced, most assumed that there were fewer than five total African Americans male graduate students on the campus.

Others finding suggest that mentors and family play a huge role in motivating African American male to pursue and persist in graduate education. Particularly mothers

and grandmothers seem to be the main motivational forces for African American males as youths and well into their adult years. It is reasonable to conclude that there are many challenges and obstacles that African American men face in graduate school. For example, social problems such as being able to relate to curriculum, classes, other students, and just the overall strain of stereotypes that black men face on a daily basis at a predominantly white institution are some of the challenges faced.

Finally, in order to facilitate more African American male students to enter not only college but graduate school, there must be more African American role models for young black males to look up to, other than those in athletics and the entertainment world. Looking at the educational pipeline and educating young African Americans to see the significance of receiving an education will help to create an expectation amongst young African American males where they will be less inclined to say no, and more willing to pursue higher education.

#### Recommendations for Practice

1. Implement more mentoring programs not only on higher education level but on the lower levels of education.
2. Less talk and more action in reference to creating a more diverse campus and student body.
3. More African American males who have achieved a higher level of education need to become more involved in the African American community (i.e. role model, leadership positions, pillars of communities).

4. Addressing elementary education, not only identifying issues associated with young African American males but actually implementing solutions to help them succeed.
5. Instill the importance of education within African American males as youths in order to build expectations of pursuing higher education.
6. Create a pool of individuals that value education, and if you create this pool or overflow where it is expected to pursue higher education then there will be less African American males inclined to reject continuing the educational process.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

1. A follow up study should be done at regular intervals using the same participants to see advancement and growth of participants.
2. A comparative study could be done on African American female graduate students, and how they experience graduate school in contrast to the African American male graduate student.
3. An additional study should be conducted to replicate this study, but expand the population to include more African American male graduate students on a national basis.
4. A more extensive review of literature about African American male graduate students and their relationships in reference to persistence to pursue a doctorates degree.
5. More studies should be done looking at the impact of elementary education on African American male's persistence in higher education.

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## APPENDIX A

### Institutional Review Board (IRB) Disposition Form



January 2, 2008

Jay C. Jones  
33 Augusta Drive  
Westampton, NJ 08060

Dear Jay C. Jones:

In accordance with the University's IRB policies and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to inform you that the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your project:

IRB application number: 2008-070

Project Title: Academic Hope: Study Investigating the Graduate School Experience of Selected African American Male Graduate Students

In accordance with federal law, this approval is effective for **one calendar year** from the date of this letter. If your research project extends beyond that date or if you need to make significant modifications to your study, you must notify the IRB immediately. Please reference the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Please retain copies of consent forms for this research for three years after completion of the research.

If, during your research, you encounter any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, you must report this immediately to the Associate Provost for Research (856-256-4053).

If you have any questions, please contact Karen Heiser (heiser@rowan.edu or 856-256-4167).

Sincerely,

Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.  
Chair, Rowan University IRB

c: Sisco, Burton, Educational Leadership, Education Hall

Office of the Associate Provost for Research  
Memorial Hall  
201 Mullica Hill Road  
Glassboro, NJ 08028-1701

856-256-4053  
856-256-4425 fax

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Consent Form

### Interview Consent Form

Hello my name is Jay C. Jones,

I am a second year graduate student and you are invited to participate in a research study which investigates the successful experiences of African American male students in graduate school.

The goals of this research are as follows: to find out how selected African American males describe their experience in graduate school at Rowan University as well as what factors motivate and influence these particular African American males to pursue graduate school. It will also look at issues that are associated with African American males who attend graduate school. Ultimately I want to know what recommendations would selected African American males make to encourage more African American males to pursue higher education.

Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary and your identity will remain completely confidential. All the information received will be grouped together with the responses of others participants and you will never be individually linked to your responses. The findings of this study maybe used for conference presentation, publications, but more importantly to help improve the conditions for African American males in graduate programs. In addition, you have the right to read a copy of the research paper that is created from this study.

If you have any questions concerning the study or the interview process please feel free to contact me at (609)-506-8853, or email at [jonesj07@students.rowan.edu](mailto:jonesj07@students.rowan.edu). Or contact my advisor Dr. Burton Sisco at (856)-256-3717 or email him at [sisco@rowan.edu](mailto:sisco@rowan.edu). Please indicate your participation by signing this consent form below. Once again I want to thank you in advance for your participation.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Sincerely,

Jay C. Jones  
Graduate Assistant  
Dr. Harley E. Flack Mentoring Program  
Rowan University

APPENDIX C

Demographic Survey

## DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Hello all participants. This survey is intended to get a further understanding of issues and characteristics that helped in your educational success. All information is strictly confidential and will not be shared with anyone else. If you do not know the answer to any of the questions just leave it blank. Once again thank you for your participation.

1. What is your age?
  - a. 21-25
  - b. 25-30
  - c. 30-35
  - d. 35 or older
2. What is your highest academic degree you hold?
  - a. Bachelors
  - b. Masters
  - c. Doctorate
3. Please enter the number of siblings you have.  
Brother\_\_\_\_  
Sister\_\_\_\_
4. How many older siblings do you have?
5. How many younger siblings do you have?
6. For each of your siblings, please give their birth order to you and the highest educational level each obtained. (ex. Older brother BA)
7. What is the highest level of education your father completed?
  - a. No Formal Education
  - b. Elementary
  - c. Some Middle or High School
  - d. High School Graduate

- e. Associates Degree (2 years of college)
- f. Bachelors Degree
- g. Some Post-Graduate
- h. Master's Degree
- i. Other Advance Degrees \_\_\_\_\_

8. What is the highest level of education your mother completed?

- a. No Formal Education
- b. Elementary
- c. Some Middle or High School
- d. High School Graduate
- e. Associates Degree (2 years of college)
- f. Bachelors Degree
- g. Some Post-Graduate
- h. Master's Degree
- i. Other Advance Degrees \_\_\_\_\_

9. What year as an undergraduate, did you know you wanted to obtain a Masters degree or higher?

- a. Freshman
- b. Sophomore
- c. Junior
- d. Senior

10. Who was your most contributing factor to your success in graduate school?

- a. Mentor
- b. Parents
- c. Peers
- d. Other \_\_\_\_\_

11. Of the following traits, which one do you think is the most important for educational attainment?

- a. Honesty
- b. Persistence
- c. Shrewdness
- d. Loyalty
- e. Determination
- f. Diplomacy
- g. Leadership
- h. Other \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Questions



# African American Male Interview Protocol

- 1. Growing up, what kind of neighborhood did you live in when you were in elementary school? (poor, average, upper class)**
- 2. In what ways did your neighborhood or community affect your educational aspirations/goals?**
- 3. What or who was your most influential source of support growing up? Explain in detail.**
- 4. What or who is your most influential source of support as an adult? Explain in detail.**
- 5. How did your background affect your efforts to obtain your undergraduate degree? (Graduate studies)**
- 6. Describe your experience in graduate school here at Rowan University as an African American male.**

- 7. How are African American males in graduate school perceived here on this campus?**
- 8. As an African American male graduate student, what obstacles, or challenges do you encounter at Rowan University?**
- 9. What do you see as your greatest strength in being able to persevere in your graduate education? Please explain**
- 10. What factors contributed to your success in graduate school? (ie. Resources, family, peers, mentors, teachers).**
- 11. Why do you think it is important to attend graduate school?**
- 12. What do you think needs to change to help more African American males obtain advanced degrees?**

**13. What would you change in the process to facilitate more African American males obtaining educational success (Master's degree or higher)?**

**14. Why is it important for African American males to pursue graduate education?**

**15. What are your aspirations after graduate school?**